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New Politics for the South

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NEW POLITICS FOR THE SOUTH

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While the material and intellectual progress of the South during the last quarter of a century has been extraordinary, politically it has remained stationary. Its political thought has been that of a single party whose sway for the most part has been absolute and undisputed. During this time the southern white people have exhibited little difference of opinion on the great political issues that have divided the people of the rest of the country though of course they differ widely among themselves on religious, educational and other questions. This unnatural condition of political sentiment, however, has not always existed in the South. In the old days before the civil war when the South held the leadership in national affairs, the white people were pretty evenly divided among themselves on all political questions upon which a natural difference of opinion was possible. In every southern state there was a Democratic and a Whig party and each rivaled the other in numbers of adherents and respectability of character, sometimes one and sometimes the other holding the reins of power. In the presidential election of 1840, for example, we find the Whigs of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia in the ascendancy; in 1844 we find the Democrats of North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee carrying their states by slight majorities; in 1848 the states of the South were about equally divided between the two parties; in 1852 all of them except Kentucky and Tennessee were carried by the Democratic party though everywhere the Whig vote was large and respectable.

During the reconstruction period when both white men and negroes voted there was still more or less division among the white voters of the South. The extravagance and corruption of the reconstructionists, however, finally drove the white people to unite solidly against their oppressors by which means the reconstructionists were driven from power and the saturnalia of mis-

rule in the South was ended. From then until now the political solidarity of the South has been an established fact. The white men of that section have stood together in political matters often sacrificing their individual convictions upon questions of national politics, in order to prevent the return to power of those who oppressed them during the time when they were powerless to resist. Since the overthrow of the reconstructionists, therefore, there has been practically but one political party in the South, and that a white man's party, and there has been but one great issue, namely, the maintenance of white supremacy. The mind of the South is always made up, and there is never any doubt before a national election as to what the result will be. The act of recording their opinions at the ballot-box so far as national elections are concerned is nothing more than a perfunctory compliance with the forms of the constitution, and has no meaning or significance to the South or to the country at large. Under such circumstances national elections in the South have become pretty much of a farce, not only because of the ridiculously small number of the voters who participate in them, but because the returns manifestly do not represent the real opinions of the voters on the national questions at issue. At the presidential election of 1904, for example, only 63,000 votes were cast in Louisiana out of a total registered electorate of 326,000. In Mississippi at the same election, with a registered vote of 120,000 only 58,500 voters took the trouble to go to the polls.¹ In South Carolina the number who voted was but 55,000 and in Florida it was but 35,000.

A national election in the South usually involves no contest and hence it is not to be wondered that only a comparatively small part of the electors feel enough interest to go to the polls to help swell the majority of candidates against whom there is practically no opposition. Such a condition of affairs in a democracy where party government and government by discussion are essential principles of the constitution is unnatural and unwholesome. It not only means the absence of a valuable check which is at once the justification and chief advantage of party government, but it means the loss of an important educational benefit which comes from the discussion and elucidation of public questions.

¹In the congressional elections of 1898 only 27,000 votes were cast in the seven congressional districts of Mississippi.

(So long as the white people of the South were exposed to the dangers of negro domination they were justified in acting together to prevent the return to power of the party which had once imposed upon them the incubus of negro rule and which might do so again if the opportunity were offered. The motive back of this feeling was not that of hatred or revenge but it was the simple instinct of self-preservation. Now, however, that the supremacy of the white race is fully established and the right of the white people to govern is everywhere readily admitted, the excuse for the political solidarity of the South on national questions no longer exists. In most of the southern states the great mass of the negro population has been disfranchised and the people of the entire country have acquiesced, to say the least, in the action of the South in providing constitutional safeguards against the return of the negro to power. Nearly twenty years have elapsed since Mississippi adopted a constitution which, in effect, took away from the negro his political privileges, and although the party which had conferred political rights upon him has been in control of the national government during most of this period, no serious attempt has been made to interfere with the action of the state or to punish it by reducing its representation in Congress as the fourteenth amendment declares shall be done. Hardly a sincere and respectable protest against the disfranchisement of the negro has yet been made by the Republican party, and recent events would seem to justify the conclusion that it has virtually abandoned him so far as his political rights are concerned.)

(The people of the North are now in substantial agreement that the South shall be allowed to deal with the negro problem in its own way so long as the negro is accorded the inherent civil rights of person and property to which he is entitled as a human being and a citizen. The declarations of the Republican national platforms in favor of the strict enforcement of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, as everybody knows, and as many of the Republican leaders themselves frankly admit, are merely for political effect and are not intended to be taken seriously. As Mr. Albert Shaw has recently observed in the "Review of Reviews,"² the Republican party has not the slightest intention of reducing the representation of the southern states for disfranchising the

²December, 1908, p. 650.

negro. Mr. Roosevelt, who certainly had a right to speak for the Republican party, declared in a letter last November to W. R. Meredith, president of the Virginia Bar Association, "I do not believe there is a single individual of any consequence who seriously dreams of cutting down southern representation and I should have no hesitation in stating anywhere and at any time that as long as the election laws are constitutionally enforced without discrimination as to color, the fear that southern representation in Congress will be cut down is both idle and absurd." (The truth is, there is hardly a man of note in the North to-day who would, if he could, take away the admitted right of the southern states to restrict the elective franchise to such of their citizens as in their judgment are most fit and capable of exercising it for the public good.) Our conclusion on this point, therefore, is that the doctrine preached by a certain class of politicians that the continued political solidarity of the South is necessary to prevent the Republican party from forcing negro rule upon the people of the South has no basis upon which to rest and they should not allow themselves to be deceived by such demagoguery. (It has been settled once for all that the South shall be let alone to determine according to its own sense of justice and expediency the conditions under which political power shall be exercised within its borders and the question, therefore, of the right of the white race to govern ought to be removed from the domain of political controversy. The calm judgment of the fair-minded people of the South must be that, on the whole, the attitude of intelligent northerners toward the South in its effort to rid itself of a corrupt and ignorant suffrage has in recent years not only not been unreasonable but that, on the contrary, it has been marked by a spirit of liberalism, fair-mindedness and sympathy.)

Both Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt in fact appointed almost as many Democrats as Republicans to important offices in the South, and in the great majority of cases where Republicans were appointed an honest effort was made to choose men of character who enjoyed the confidence and respect of the people of the communities concerned. President Taft is following the same policy, yet we sometimes hear such claptrap as that recently attributed to one of the Georgia senators that the people of the South are still ostracized and treated as aliens by the government at Wash-

ington. It is difficult to believe that the intelligent men of the South are capable of being misled by such puerile appeals to their passions and prejudices.

(Turning now from the attitude of the North to the actual political situation in the South we find that there is hardly a community in any southern state in which there is any considerable white population where the white people are not in political control. Even in the counties of the black belt where the negro population sometimes outnumbers the white population in the proportion of ten to one and even fifteen to one, with a few exceptions, the local offices are all held by white men. With all the millions of negroes in the South there is not a black representative in either house of congress or in any state legislature; not one holds a state office and, except in a few towns inhabited almost wholly by negroes, there are practically none holding local offices. The truth is the negro is virtually out of politics in the South. [Many thousands of those who might register as voters feel no interest in the elections or at least not enough to comply with the conditions required of voters.] Practically everywhere the white race is in control and it will continue to remain in control. No one knows this better than the negro himself and it is not too much to say that he has accepted this situation as one of the inexorable facts of his existence. If the white people of the South exercise their power of control wisely and justly it can be perpetuated to the end of time without protest or interference on the part of the country at large or indeed without serious opposition from the black race itself. The question of white supremacy therefore is no longer a living issue and as a subject of political discussion it may be safely relegated to the limbo of oblivion. The problem of the extent and quality of the education which the negro should have, how his efficiency as a laborer and his usefulness as a citizen may be increased, how his criminal instincts may be curbed and his respect for law and authority increased, are, however, problems which the South must still meet and solve but they are not national political issues upon which the southern people must vote at every national election or which should be allowed to absorb their whole thought to the exclusion of other questions. The time has come when the people of the South should cease to allow themselves to be frightened by what President Taft has called the specter of negro domination and should begin to express their

sentiments on the living issues of the time rather than upon questions which are settled and from which only harm can result by their continued agitation. The South ought to free itself from the thralldom of a single issue and give more consideration to the great economic and political questions which divide the people of the rest of the country and with which their own progress and welfare are bound up.

The principal argument against the division of the white voters of the South into two political parties is, that it would pave the way for the return of the negro to power. But the facts hardly justify such a conclusion. Prior to the Civil War when the Whigs and Democrats of the South were almost equally divided upon the question of the bank, the tariff, internal improvements and other great national issues, they stood solidly together on the slavery question, with the result that the Abolition party never gained any headway in the South. Is it not natural to suppose that the white men of the South can vote differently upon issues which divide the people of the North and the West and yet remain united on the question of the political status of the negro? Does it follow that if they should differ among themselves as to the wisdom of territorial expansion, the desirability of a protective tariff, the advantages of a particular monetary system or the expediency of subsidizing the merchant marine they must also divide on the question of political rights for the negro? There is no good reason why they cannot be divided on economic issues as the fingers of the hand, to use a figure employed by Booker Washington, and yet remain united as the hand itself on the question of white supremacy.

It seems to me that there is a place in the South for a political party with other issues than the race question—a party which will make itself the exponent of some of the living, economic and educational questions of the time and fight its battles upon constructive, progressive policies of vital interest to the development and prosperity of the South rather than upon the old issues growing out of the civil war and the reconstruction period. We have had quite enough agitation of dead issues by small politicians whose chief stock in trade is the negro question in some form or other and too little wholesome discussion of economic and industrial issues of practical interest to the people of the South and the country at large. We have lately seen in the South the

upgrowth of a new school of politicians who have risen to power largely through the exploitation of the race issue. Instead of proposing and championing constructive policies of live interest to the people of their states they have appealed mainly to the passions and prejudices of the masses by indiscriminate abuse of the negro, by dwelling upon his brutality, criminality and mental inferiority, by denouncing the Republican party for its sins and mistakes in the past and by recounting and often magnifying the evils and humiliations of the reconstruction period and thus keeping alive and perpetuating old animosities that had better be forgotten. We have recently seen an unimportant political campaign in one of the southern states conducted almost entirely on issues of this kind, issues that were not real and natural but were injected into the contest largely because they were capable of being turned into political capital.

In several other Southern States the question of the negro in one form or another has recently been an important if not the leading issue, and it is well known that more than one southern man in public life to-day has attained his honors largely through the successful exploitation of the negro question though in no instance was it a natural or real issue.

There is a tendency among the southern people, and especially among the southern politicians, to become obsessed with the idea that there is only one great, vital and fundamental question of interest to the South and that the question of the negro. As a southerner, viewing the situation from the outside, it seems to me that the people of the South are in danger of allowing themselves to be completely absorbed by this single issue when in reality as a subject of political controversy it belongs to the past rather than the present. There is also a disposition, it seems to me, among many southern people to exaggerate the peculiar conditions and problems of the South, to fancy that what is expedient and good for the rest of the country is not wise or suitable for them and that in many respects the South must be treated differently from the North and West. The Reverend John E. White, of Atlanta, in a recent discussion of this question says:

As long as we struggled for that which was good for everybody everywhere, we moved with Providence and the South led the van. There were great human concerns involved in the building up of the republic. The whole

world was interested in it. It was a work ennobling to a people—the inspiration of a great national usefulness. The disaster began when the South began to think only for itself—began to have only one problem. Monomania is a disease. This is the final fact, though other causes were contributory to it. This is the false note in southern life. The question for safe and sound citizenship, then, is the question of getting ourselves free from the thrall of one issue and of interesting the people in matters that stimulate life and that generate moral and intellectual energy. What I ask you, and what I wish every thoughtful southern man to consider is whether the Negro question is a fair price for southern progress—whether there are not for us and our children other and greater benefits which are endangered by our absorption in it? It is whether the Negro question is great enough to make a great people?

I have been much of my life intimate with average southerners—the people in the country sections—and I have marked it that this average man responds at once to the idea that we would be better off, everything would be better off, if we were less absorbed in this one question. There is an unorganized and undeveloped moral instinct in the South that it is an unhealthy, unprofitable business. Now, for ten years the South has had a flood of agitation on the Negro problem. Let us take stock and see where we are. We are less fit to think straight and feel true on the subject than we were ten years ago. Mentally and morally, we are less capable of statesmanship on the subject than we were.^a

I agree with Mr. White that the South ought to free itself from the thrall of a single issue and devote more of its energies to the solution of the living problems which really confront its people. I have sometimes thought that if the time and talent expended by the newspapers and public speakers of the South in discussing such matters as the Booker Washington and Minnie Cox “incidents” had been devoted to a consideration of such questions as the conservation of the resources of the South, the improvement of its schools or some other question of real importance, the result would have been much more beneficial to its people. It has always seemed to me that the amount of attention bestowed upon such matters in the South is out of all proportion to their importance and that there is too little wholesome discussion by its public men of larger questions of vital interest to the people.

The solidity of the South politically and the persistency with which it has clung to the negro issue to the virtual neglect of other and more important questions has produced a somewhat unusual and unnatural condition of affairs in that part of the country. In the

^aThe “South Atlantic Quarterly,” Vol. V, p. 106.

first place the southern mind has allowed itself to become so engrossed with the negro question that it has to a certain extent become incapable of clear and unbiased thinking upon economic and other questions of interest to the South and the country at large. Absorption by a single question has a natural tendency to obscure the vision, weaken the sense of perspective and to unfit one for sound and wholesome consideration of other questions. The political intolerance which necessarily results from the feeling that the solidity of the South must be preserved in political matters has tended to deaden the higher intellectual activities of the people and to create an atmosphere unfavorable to the development of an independent and vigorous constructive statesmanship among its public men. It has frequently been observed of late that the South has not produced a really great statesman during the last generation. Too many of the southern leaders live on theories and on the past. The South has lately been reproached by some of its own distinguished men⁴ for allowing itself to become the chosen home of nearly every political and economic vagary known to the country and too often when its natural leaders have asserted their independence and refused to champion popular heresies and fallacies, they have been retired to private life. The careers of John G. Carlisle, Roger Q. Mills, Thomas C. Catchings, John L. McLaurin and others might be cited as examples in illustration of this point.

As I now write some newspapers of the South are denouncing as a traitor the present Secretary of War, a distinguished southerner of whose character and attainments the whole South may well be proud, because, on a notable occasion, he recently expressed the opinion that it was better for the South that the cause for which it contended during the Civil War was lost. As long as the South encouraged independence of political thinking, as long as it thought nationally on the great questions of the day and refused to be absorbed by a single issue it had great leaders, thousands of northern people followed them and helped the South to elect Presidents and Vice-Presidents, and enabled it to play a part and exert an influence in national affairs worthy of its great place in the Union. But of late years the southern democracy, as ex-Senator McLaurin, of South Carolina, well says, "has become mongrelized by an infusion of

⁴ For example by Professor Trent, Mr. Walter H. Page, editor of "The World's Work," ex-Senator McLaurin of South Carolina and President Alderman of the University of Virginia.

Tillmanism, Vardamanism, populism, socialism and other 'isms,' " it has persisted in clinging to old issues that ought to be abandoned and forgotten or to others which do not interest the people of the rest of the country; it has in short refused to adapt its political thought and action to the new and changed economic conditions under which the people now live. Under such circumstances thousands of people in other parts of the country whose natural sympathies are with the Democratic party and who would act with it if it were abreast of the times are now voting with the Republican party in national elections. In recent years we have seen the people of Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Rhode Island and Indiana voting by large majorities in favor of Democratic governors yet voting by still larger majorities for the Republican national ticket. Some states indeed which have not voted for a Democratic President in forty years now have Democratic governors and other state officials.

I venture the opinion that if the Democratic party of the South were to rid itself of the vagaries of which ex-Senator McLaurin speaks, turn its back upon the old issues growing out of the Civil War and reconstruction period, and take up the advocacy of sound constructive progressive policies in which the South and the country at large have a real interest not many years will elapse before we shall see it in power at Washington. But until that is done the Democratic party will probably continue to pursue a forlorn hope. To-day it is almost without a representative from the North in the Senate of the United States to champion its policies, while political effacement of the South in national affairs is well nigh complete, though its material and intellectual power has been vastly increased. Candor compels me to believe that there is a good deal of truth in the recent statement of President Taft at Greensboro, N. C., that "if the southern people had kept up with the times, had they at the ballot-box expressed their sentiments on the living issues of the day instead of allowing themselves to be frightened by a specter and a shadow of the past, their political importance as communities and the significance of their views upon measures and men would have been vastly enhanced." His assertion that the South has been kept solid by the "bogey" of negro domination and by the success of the politicians in stirring up and keeping alive race prejudice and by keeping the people in a state of alarm over an impossible return of the conditions of the reconstruction days is a truth too widely admitted to require argument.

The late Senator L. Q. C. Lamar, in a notable address at Jackson, Miss., in 1875, following the overthrow of the reconstructionists in that state, predicted that the negro question had been eliminated from the domain of political controversy and that henceforth the southern people would be free to turn their attention to the great economic questions that were then demanding their consideration. But within recent years we have seen all other questions in Lamar's state give way to a discussion of the negro, in a campaign characterized by a spirit of bitterness and radicalism never before seen in Mississippi since the days of reconstruction. I am certain that had Lamar been living the great weight of his influence would have been thrown against the revival and agitation of the old issues which he thought were settled and forgotten. Nothing but harm to the South can come from this revival of race agitation. It not only tends to alienate from the support of the Democratic party people of the North who are naturally Democratic in their sympathies and traditions, but it serves to irritate the public mind of the South, keep alive and perpetuate old animosities, arouse distrust and hatred, unsettle business conditions, array the white and black races against each other, keep desirable immigrants out of the South and retard clear and wholesome political thinking, through the injection of false issues into the politics of the South. The assertion of certain politicians that the repeal of the fifteenth amendment is necessary to the perpetuity of white supremacy in political matters and the preservation of peace and harmony between the white and black races is nothing but the cheapest demagoguery while the social equality and negro domination fears are, as I have said, the merest "bogies" from which the people of the South no longer have anything to dread.

Fortunately the signs indicate a growing change of sentiment in the South. The number of men who are moved by appeals to their passions and prejudices is growing smaller and the discontent with the economic doctrines of the new Democracy is spreading throughout the South. Many thoughtful southerners are growing tired of voting on dead issues or for principles that are repugnant to their honest convictions. What Senator Tillman has stigmatized as the "commercial democracy" of ex-Senator McLaurin has far more supporters than appears on the surface, and some day it will have to be reckoned with. The tremendous

industrial growth of the South and particularly the rise of manufacturing have created conditions with which the Tillman brand of democracy is out of harmony. The recent debates in Congress over the tariff question and the attitude of many southern members show that the Democratic doctrine that a protective tariff is robbery and a fraud is losing much of its old time sanctity. Likewise the sacrosanctness of the old doctrine of states rights has lately suffered a terrible blow. "In recent years we have seen the South supporting with enthusiasm a federal quarantine law, federal regulation of railway traffic, federal inspection of slaughter houses, federal pure food legislation, what amounts to a federal prohibition law and other national measures which a few years ago would have been opposed on the ground that they involved an infringement upon the reserved rights of the states. Finally, the election returns indicate that the people of the South are beginning to show a greater independence in their political thinking and in their voting at national elections. I have before me as I write the official returns of the presidential election of 1908 in Alabama, which show that Taft carried six counties in that state and that in as many more counties the vote was almost equally divided between him and Bryan. In Arkansas and Florida he received more than one-third of the popular vote, in Georgia considerably more than one-half as many votes as Bryan; he carried Maryland; received only some 20,000 votes less than Bryan in North Carolina out of a total of 251,000; in Tennessee only 17,000 less than Bryan out of a total of 253,000; in Virginia only 30,000 less and in Kentucky only about 9,000 less out of a total of 480,000.

The signs would seem to indicate, therefore, that the new democracy is losing its hold upon the people of the South, and unless it finds new issues in the near future the political solidarity of the South will be a thing of the past. I agree with the president of the University of Virginia that in time there will be a "rebirth of party government" in the South and that "two or more parties representing the intelligence and patriotism of these states will divide and consider issues on their merits," and that some day "southern men will win the presidency because they will incarnate the thing people desire a President for."

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